

Remarks at the Kennedy Center Honors Reception

December 4, 2022

Hello, hello, hello. Please, please have a seat. Welcome, everyone. Jill and I are truly honored to host for our—some of our most favorite events here in the White House. This ranks right up there.

And a special thanks to our friend David Rubenstein. David, you've become a friend. David is Chairman of the Board of the Kennedy Center here and probably puts more time in there than does in his business. But thank you, David, for all you do. And President of the Kennedy Center, Deborah Rutter. Deborah, raise your hand. Let people see where you are.

And to all of you supporters of the arts and families and friends of this year's honorees: You know, this reception is a fitting way to cap what has been a special week.

On Monday, Jill unveiled the theme of this year's holiday at the White House, the theme that's reflected in the incredible decor that you see in every room that's grounded in the very idea of America: "We the People." We the people. The first words of the Constitution. The beating heart of our democracy. The story of our Nation that makes America, America.

The power of democracy is something I talked about a few days before, when President Macron was here and—the President of France—we hosted on our first state visit. France, our oldest ally. We talked about the inflection point we face as free nations and how the choices we make today and in the next several months, or in the next years as well, are going to determine the future for decades to come, dealing with everything from an unjust war in Ukraine to the climate crisis to the global economy on the move.

But we shared confidence and optimism that we will meet this moment because of our faith in "We the People." And that's the truth. And our—at our State dinner, Jill and I asked an artist to capture the faith as only an artist can do. Jon Batiste was our guest, the son of a famed—*[applause]*—the son of a famed New Orleans family of jazz musicians and civil rights leaders. An Oscar and Grammy winner.

He sang his song called "Freedom" and spoke about the power of art that brings people together despite our differences to see each other—to see ourselves in one other, and to unite in common cause.

Tonight we celebrate a truly exceptional—and this no—that's not an exaggeration—a truly exceptional group of artists—who embody the very spirit of "We the People." At this year's Kennedy Center honorees, they're a—an incredible group of people.

In "We the People," we see character. We see Amal Clooney's husband. *[Laughter]* George is one of the most celebrated actors, directors, producers, and screenwriters of our time. Two Academy Awards. One of only three people nominated in six different categories. A—you know, he portrays iconic characters: an heroic doctor, a daring astronaut, a wise-cracking con-man. The list goes on.

I—one thing I respect most about George—and I mean this sincerely—is his deep empathy. He's never forgotten before the fame, back home, what it was like back in Kentucky and Ohio as a kid. A kid with dyslexia. A college dropout figuring out life.

After missing his dream of playing baseball for the Cincinnati Reds—you think he's joking; I'm not joking—*[laughter]*—he chases a new dream in Hollywood. Working on a tobacco farm to

earn some scratch. Sleeping in his friend's closet with nowhere to go until he finally gets his break.

No matter where he is or what he does, he always remembers where he came from. You know, he's the son of Nick and Nina, both of whom are here tonight. Nick and Nina, raise your hands please.

Dad is a reporter. And Mom, a councilwoman. But Mom looks more like his sister. [Laughter] They taught George and his big sister that the life spent challenging the powerful on behalf of the powerless is a life of purpose.

He travels to war zones to end genocides and war crimes, exposes war profiteers, helps refugees, and advances the rights of journalists. Raises millions of dollars to support 9/11 first responders; victims of natural disaster; and advocates who, along with him, are combating hate.

Mentors—he mentors these—those historic kids from Parkland on their march and their lives—against gun violence. I met with every one of those kids, and they really appreciate what you did, George. Not a joke.

He knows the work remains unfinished, yet he is unrelenting and undaunted. That's character in real life. And that's George Clooney.

And in "We the People," we see faith and light. We see Amy Grant, a child of Nashville—[applause]—a child of Nashville sitting in the front pew of church with her great-grandmother, singing hymns and learning harmony. With her parents' love, she recorded her first album while she was still in high school—the start of a more than three-decade career and still counting—that established the contemporary Christian music as we know it today.

Six Grammy's. Six Grammy's. Nineteen nominations. The first contemporary Christian artist to be number one on the pop charts. And her Christian [Christmas; White House correction] songs are played on repeat in millions of homes across America.

Like the greatest, she has—you know, I can't get over you, quite frankly. [Laughter] Like the greatest do, she writes songs from her soul about joy, about loss, about healing, about how others feel and how you make people feel when you sing. I really mean it.

She does more than that. Everywhere you turn in Nashville, you see Amy's fellowship. Established musical therapy at a children's hospital; for veterans struggling with wounds of war. Playing benefit concerts for a long list of worthy causes. Amy calls music a "soul-enlarging experience." In my church, St. Augustine said it slightly differently. He said, "Singing is praying twice." [Laughter] Singing is praying twice.

You understand when you hear Amy Grant sings. Her voice—her voice—is a true gift of God, and she shares it with everyone, especially with her incredible family, including her husband Vince Gill, who can—has a pretty damn good voice himself. [Laughter]

Amy, thank you for always keeping the faith. Every time I'd walk out of my Grandpop Finnegan's house in Scranton, he'd yell, "Joey, keep the faith." My grandma would yell, "No, Joey, spread it." You spread it. Thank you.

In "We the People," we also hear goodness and grace of the one and only Express [Empress; White House correction] of Soul, Gladys Knight. God love you. A daughter of Atlanta who grew up in a church choir. Began performing with her brother, sister, and cousins, a group that became known as "Gladys Knight and the Pips." You're on my recording.

After over 6 decades, 7 Grammy's, 20 nominations, including the best Gospel album; 11 number-one R&B singles—singles; 6 number-one R&B albums; 2 number-one top Billboard hits. Grammy Hall of Fame. Rock N' Roll Hall of Fame. Rhythm and Blues Hall of Fame.

She's performed on the biggest stages. But, a point of personal privilege, I think her performance in 1919 [2019; White House correction] at the 100th anniversary of the Delaware State Fair was pretty special. [Laughter] They're still talking about it, Gladys. Not a joke. Not a joke. And down at the fair, they speak like y'all do down in Atlanta, you know what I mean? [Laughter] Yes.

Just a few days ago, we observed World AIDS Day, a much different day than during the worst of the epidemic in the eighties. Back then, Gladys joined Elton John, Stevie Wonder, Dionne Warwick and the benefit—in a benefit record to sing "That's What Friends Are For." It reached number one on the charts, shattering the stigma and opening hearts.

The title of her autobiography is "You Were There Between Each Line of My Pain and Glory." Gladys, your voice—your voice—has spoken to what breaks our hearts, what tears us apart, what lifts our spirits, what brings us together, what makes us human. Gladys, you're truly one of the best things ever to happen to any of us.

So, if you don't mind me saying it, we're going to get on that midnight train, because I think—[laughter]—I speak for all of America when I say, "We'd rather live in your world than be without you in ours." I told her I think I have about every one of her songs on my phone. [Laughter] But—because I remember them. She was only 12 when she was making them, but they—[laughter].

In "We the People," we also hear courage and creativity. We hear Tania León, born and raised in a working class Havana, surrounded by the varied sounds of Cuba and the fusion of cultures and music. A young child who danced to the radio not long after she learned to walk. At age 4, her grandmother enrolled her in a music conservatory. She trained into her twenties to be a classical piano player and broadened a—and boarded a Freedom Flight to Miami in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. Just days later, landed in New York City.

Over the next 6 decades, she became one of the most important classical composers and conductors of our time. During the civil rights movement, she cofounded the Dance Theatre in Harlem, the country's first Black classical ballet company.

She also conducted the world-renowned New York Philharmonic and worked with the Brooklyn Philharmonic to bring classical music beyond concert halls into city neighborhoods. She led symphonies in South Africa to Germany—from South Africa to Germany.

A mentor and a professor, she champions new composers. Earning dozens of honors—her versatility, her vision, her defying labels, her deepening Latin American influence in classical music.

It was President Kennedy who laid the groundwork for the Freedom Flights that brought Tiana [Tania; White House correction] to America. Fifty-five years later, she now receives a Kennedy Center honors. And we thank her—thank her for breathing new sounds into the soul of the nation.

In "We the People," we hear the words of one of my favorite poets of all times. My colleagues up in the United States Senate used to kid me because I was always quoting Irish poets on the floor. [Laughter] They thought I did it because I was Irish. That's not the reason. I did it because they're the best poets in the world. [Laughter]

But we hear the words of Yeats. He said: "Think where a man's glory most begins and ends and say my glory was I had such friends." Words that echo from an island close to my heart, as a descendent of County Mayo and County Louth.

Tonight we honor four sons of Ireland, poets in their own right, best friends who started a band as teenagers in Dublin and became one of the greatest bands in history: Larry, Adam, The

Edge, Bono—U2. U2. Inheritors of the Irish traditions of poetry and protest; rebellion and rejoicing; faith, hope, and love; and a belief in the dignity of all people, everywhere. Dignity is a very important word to them all.

And to quote my friend Bono, "Music can change the world because it can change people." For more than 40 years, U2 has changed the world. Anthems about civil rights, solidarity of workers, the struggle for peace. Ballads about love and family. Concerts dedicated to ending poverty and disease. Twenty-two Grammy's. Forty-six nominations. More wins than any group in history. A hundred and fifty million albums. A hundred and fifty albums sold, among the most ever.

And it's true that their music is a bridge between Ireland and America, between two friends linked in memory and imagination, joined by our histories, and joined by a nostalgia for the future. I—you know, they put down the things that are original quotes of the Presidents and Senators? The only one they have listed for me is—and it really is something I realize I got from my family—is, "The Irish are the only people in the world who are always nostalgic about the future." [Laughter] The future.

But it's more than that—more universal, more fundamental, and more important than ever. From "Sunday Bloody Sunday" to "Pride (In the Name of Love)" to "Ordinary Love" to "One," the—U2 has spoken and sung about the unspeakable costs of hate and anger and division—the pain, the suffering, the denial of freedom, the senseless loss of life, and the inhumanity we inflict on one another as nations, as people, and in our own lives. All flowing from division that, for all of us is—its visible manifestations lie first and foremost in our hearts.

Just before America's bloody and deadly Civil War, President Lincoln wrote, "We are not enemies . . . We must not be enemies." In the midst of the great division, that was President Lincoln's plea. He would—we would do well to remember it today.

At a moment when there's too much hate, too much anger, too much division here in America and, quite frankly, around the world, we have to remember today, as their song goes: "We're one, but we're not the same. We get to carry each other."

From this Irish American President in a White House designed by an Irish hands, who built this and designed it, I want to thank U2 for all you've done and the way you lift people up. You really make a difference. Thank you.

So, ladies and gentlemen, the 2022 Kennedy Center Honorees. Congratulations to you and your wonderful families. And thank you for showing us the power of the arts in "We the People."

God bless you all, and may God protect our troops. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:52 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Adelia Zeidler, sister of actor George T. Clooney; Brenda Knight, sister, and William Guest and Edward Patten, cousins, of musician Gladys M. Knight; and musicians Larry Mullen, Jr., Adam Clayton, David H. "The Edge" Evans, and Paul D. "Bono" Hewson.

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Patten, Edward; Rubenstein, David M.; Rutter, Deborah F.; Warwick, Dionne; Wonder, Stevie; Zeidler, Adelia.

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